

# Looking for Ideas about Error Correction? Try One of These!

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*By Margaret Lopez*

"She scream, he scream, and then I scream!" Omission of the third-person singular "s" is an error that drives all ESL/EFL teachers insane, along with all those other "little" errors we see committed repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly, whether we teach in Asia, Africa, the Americas or on another continent. What is the best way to correct students' errors? The answers are as varied as teaching styles and teachers' personalities. Each of us must find, experiment with, and then choose the methods that work best for our students. The following are a few suggestions.

## Sign Language

Develop a signal with your students that tells them to stop, reflect on the error made, and self-correct before continuing with their speaking. Karin B. Larsen, an ESL/Spanish teacher in Copenhagen, suggests to simply raise an index finger silently in the air, as if about to interrupt or make a point. This method may be particularly appropriate for the omission of the third-person singular "s."

## Speaking

### *Eavesdropping*

While students are working in groups or pairs, circulate and note mistakes heard (write as much context as possible). Then at the end of that class or any other time, write the sentences on the board to be corrected as a class discussion. Variation 1: Have the students correct the mistakes in small groups and compare their answers with other small groups. Variation 2: Have each small group work on two or three sentences, and then present and explain their corrections to the class. Variation 3: Make a worksheet from the mistakes to be used in any of the above ways or given as homework.

### *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

In this exercise, the teacher transforms herself or himself from the understanding EFL teacher to the typical person on the street with whom the students will be required to communicate, as if using their English outside the classroom. The teacher should ask a lot of questions like, "What? I didn't understand what you meant" or, "I'm sorry, I can't understand what you're saying." Also, ask other students, "Do you understand what she or he said?" The idea is to replicate a native speaker's possible response or confusion to show the students what is really important to express clearly (e.g., tenses).

### *Fishbowl*

One part of the class is grouped into the center of the room for a discussion while the remaining students sit around them and listen silently to the discussion, noting any mistakes they hear. After 10 or 15 minutes, the listeners put a summary of the mistakes on the board for class correction. Then switch roles and repeat so all the students get to perform both tasks. The discussion group shouldn't have more than five or six students. Variation 1: If a hand-held recorder or microphone is available and the students are conscientious about using it effectively, one group can play both roles for themselves.

### *Finger coding*

Use one hand to point to the fingers on your other hand to indicate the words of a sentence or a question. Stop on or wiggle the finger when a mistake has been made to focus the students' attention there. This is good for correcting word order, missing words, subject-verb agreement, and wrong word choice. The teacher prompts the students' self-correction.

### *Switcheroo*

Crisscross fingers, hands, or be dramatic and go for the whole arm to show when the order of two words should be reversed. Stay silent. This is especially good for adjective/noun placement and question formation.

### *Sign Language*

Use large pieces of brightly colored paper. Put a big "S" on one to correct third-person singular mistakes. On another piece, write the word "to" but crossed out with a big X to correct the wrong use of "to" with infinitive. Hold the signs up as needed.

### *Caught on tape*

Record the students' presentations and point out problematic areas and words. For advanced levels, give a written evaluation or have the students do it for their classmates.

### *Silent Way style*

When students make mistakes, give them a directive to correct the error without giving them the correction itself. For example, say things like, "Change the pronunciation," "Change the verb," or "Change the third word."

## **Writing**

Peer correction of first drafts may include underlining any problems, adding written comments at the end of an essay about clarity, or suggesting improvements (depending on level of class). This may also be followed by pair discussion about mistakes found. This works well as a preliminary to first draft self-editing by the students. This can be done in pairs working on one individual's paper, in pairs working on a pair-written paper, or individually working on an individual's paper.

## **Conclusion**

Variety is the spice of life, and necessity is the mother of invention. Proverbs are clichés, but we all know them because they ring true. Different correction methods may be appropriate for different student groups and in varying circumstances. Be flexible and correct.

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## References

Lopez, M. 1996. Presentation on Error Correction at the AII-ALC TEFL Conference. Marrakech, Morocco.